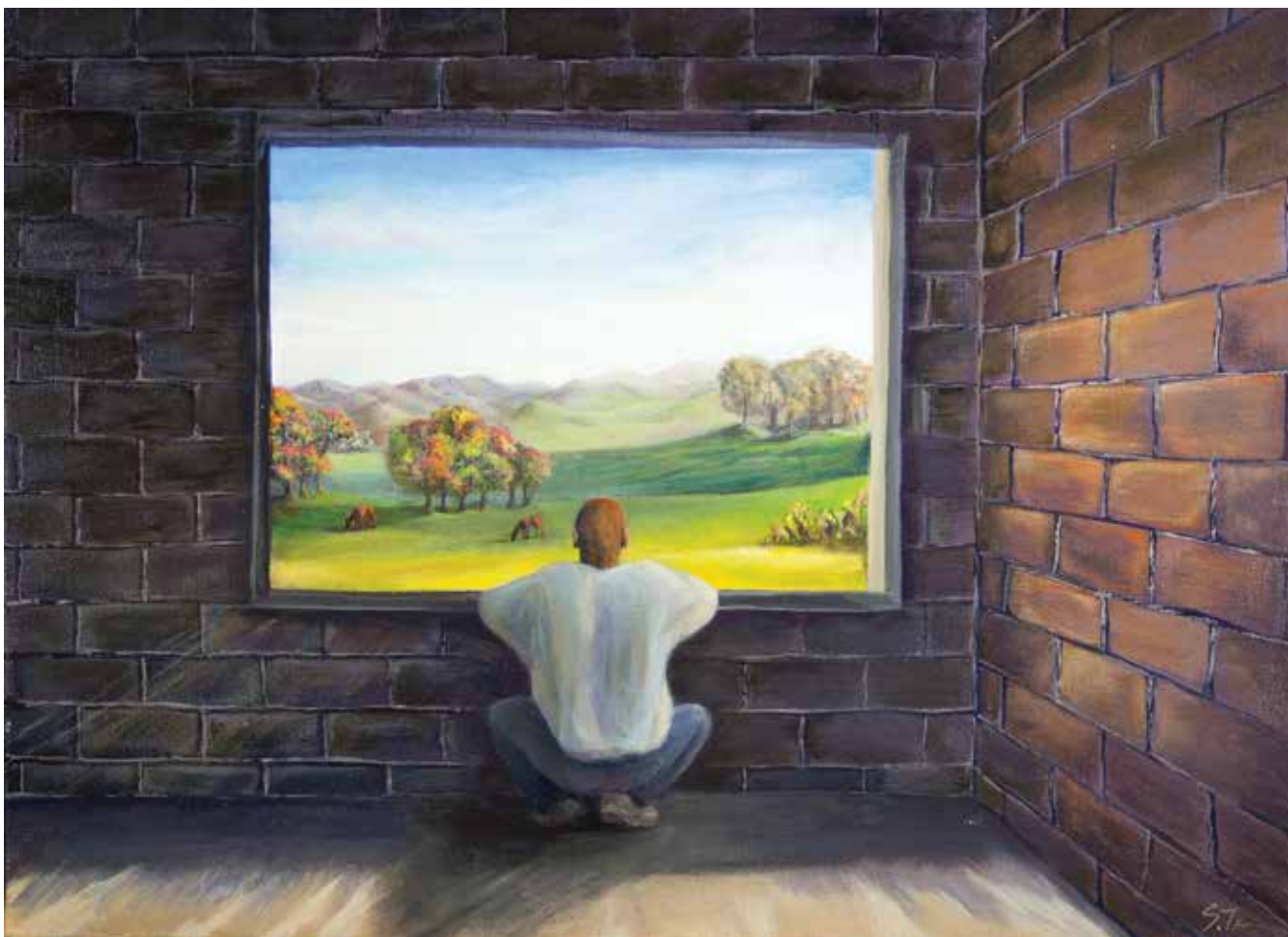


# CREATING OFFENDER SUCCESS

## A NEW VISION AT THE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

By Heidi E. Washington



*Repose* by Sergei Tkachenko

Affecting every aspect of departmental operations, the Michigan Offender Success Model drives the discussion and effort within the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC). The mission of Offender Success is to reduce crime by offering programs, services, and opportunities to offenders with the goal of employment and self-sufficiency. Education is the cornerstone of the model, which is why MDOC has launched programs like the Vocational Village and Pell Grant housing units that will continue to expand in the future. Offender Success affects more than just an

offender's time in prison, however; one of the main goals is entirely diverting offenders from prison by addressing what brought them into contact with the criminal justice system rather than simply relying on incarceration as a punishment for their actions.

### Vocational Village

Nowhere has MDOC's commitment to Offender Success been more public than with the Vocational Village programs

in Ionia and Jackson. Although the department has offered vocational programs to prisoners for decades, this effort was revitalized with the Vocational Village model that provides offenders with a leg up as they return to their communities. The first Village opened at the Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia in 2016 using a therapeutic/vocational community model. Prisoners apply to participate in the Village, answering questions such as how they will use the opportunity to ensure their personal success moving forward.<sup>1</sup> Prisoners selected to participate are placed in a vocational trade program based on their aptitude and the employment opportunities available in the community to which they will parole. Once in the program, prisoners learn their trade surrounded by similarly committed offenders and instructors, spending six-plus hours a day in the classroom learning practical and soft skills while earning the same industry credentials they could earn at a trade school or community college.

In the Village model, prisoners also share a dedicated housing unit that is focused on their success. Prisoners spend evenings participating in cognitive programming, soft-skills programs, and study halls, all with the goal of preparing them for self-sufficiency and success when they parole. Job postings fill the dayroom bulletin boards, and prisoners are routinely called together to watch one of their fellow students receive a job offer with a livable wage from a Michigan company. These job offers are the result of the dedicated work of staff, who serve as cheerleaders not only for the Village, but also for the villagers who graduate. Businesses, unions, and trade associations have all toured the Village to learn how they can fill their needs for talented workers while helping MDOC accomplish its goal of creating offender success.<sup>2</sup> Some employers have even hired villagers to start the day after they parole. This focus on employment and self-sufficiency is a hallmark of Offender Success, and is why the Village model has now expanded to the Parnall Correctional Facility in Jackson and soon will be introduced to Women's Huron Valley in Ypsilanti. Each Village will host a unique mix of vocational programs to ensure that MDOC has diversified offerings that match the changing employment markets in Michigan, but each will share the vocational community model that has worked so well in Ionia.

## Education

MDOC is proud of the fact that another avenue to self-enrichment is available to prisoners through post-secondary education. The department still limits the use of state resources for post-secondary education because of a lack of specific appropriation for this purpose,<sup>3</sup> but thanks to a generous grant from the Vera Foundation through the Pathways from Prison initiative, Michigan established that there is significant interest in higher education within the prisons. This effort positioned Michigan to receive roughly 1,500 Pell Grants under an experimental sites program.<sup>4</sup> Building from the success of the

Vocational Village's community model, MDOC has launched Pell educational housing units around the state where prisoners who are actively participating in post-secondary education live together to allow them to focus on their studies. To seed as many MDOC facilities as possible with educational communities, the Pell program is now available at nine facilities.

## Dog programs

Among the most popular programs now offered in MDOC facilities are the various dog programs. These include greyhound rescue, shelter dog training, Leader Dogs for the Blind, and Stiggy's Dogs, which trains dogs for returning service members who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Each of these programs pairs a dog with a set of prisoner handlers who live with and care for the dog 24 hours a day in the housing unit. Prisoners train the animals for future work as service animals or pets, allowing prisoners to give back while strengthening their empathy and allowing them to participate in a long-term project for which they can see a clear outcome.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the expansion of dog programs in the housing units has changed the environment in many of the facilities, giving staff and prisoners a common bond with the animals. MDOC has also begun using therapy dogs to directly aid prisoners at the Duane Waters Health Center and Woodland Center Correctional Facility. The effect is already apparent at the Woodland facility, which houses prisoners suffering from severe mental illnesses. Staff and prisoners report significant progress on the part of some prisoners since the arrival of Sadie, the therapy dog.

## WRAP

Recognizing that there was still an unmet need for secure programming for high-risk probationers, MDOC launched the Wayne Residential Alternative to Prison (WRAP) pilot program in 2016. This program, available to the 3rd Circuit Court, gives judges the ability to sentence probation violators facing revocation and a likely prison sentence to a shorter, more intensive program run by MDOC at the Detroit Reentry Center.

## Fast Facts

1. The Michigan Department of Corrections has adopted a new model called Offender Success that focuses on education, employment, and self-sufficiency.
2. The results are already becoming evident, as the prison population has declined by more than 5 percent in the past two years, while Michigan's recidivism rate remains at historical lows.

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WRAP is primarily intended for offenders who have failed under community supervision because of their inability to remain in programming such as residential substance-abuse treatment. Left with few options after repeatedly violating probation, many of these offenders are subsequently sentenced to prison. WRAP was launched to provide judges with an alternative sentencing option in Wayne County after recognizing that a focused approach could provide offenders with the cognitive programming and vocational training they were likely to receive in prison, but on a much shorter timeline of four to six months.<sup>6</sup> Using nearly 50 beds at the Detroit Reentry Center, the program requires probationers to follow the custody rules of the facility while spending much of their day in programming. To date, 76 of the 93 probationers sentenced to the program have successfully returned to the community, with many subsequently discharged from probation. The program ensures public safety by removing high-risk probationers from the community when their behavior warrants incarceration, but limits the term of incarceration to minimize the negative effects on employment and the offender's family.

MDOC has subsequently sought funding to replicate this program on the west side of the state because of the high number of probation violators that continue to be sentenced to prison. While still collecting data on the long-term outcomes for this population, MDOC hopes that WRAP can provide a new model for probation violations and revocations because it focuses on limiting incarceration to only those cases when it is truly necessary and only for the duration needed to provide offenders with the tools to meet their criminogenic needs and reduce their risk.<sup>7</sup>

### Improving PSI recommendations

Turning a prison term into productive time for offenders is an important aspect of Offender Success, but the real goal must be to change the individual's path as early as possible when they encounter the criminal justice system. Incarceration brings with it steep costs in terms of family connectedness, employment, and other factors important to future success. A major focus of MDOC has been offering courts, prosecutors, and offenders an alternative to long-term incarceration to keep individuals safely in the community. One alternative is MDOC

probation sentencing specialists who review all straddle-cell presentence investigation (PSI) reports to ensure that sentencing recommendations are consistent. Even with programs like Community Corrections that provide state funding to local communities to promote the use of probation rather than incarceration, offenders in the straddle cells of the sentencing guideline grids receive widely varying dispositions.<sup>8</sup> Though roughly 33 percent of these cases statewide result in a sentence to prison, some individual counties have straddle-cell prison disposition rates higher than 60 percent.<sup>9</sup>

To create more consistency within the state and ensure that offenders' criminogenic needs are effectively addressed, initial PSI sentencing recommendations made by the probation agent are now reviewed by one of the regional probation sentencing specialists who can change a recommendation before it reaches the court. Often, offenders will be sentenced to prison because of a lack of community programs to address their specific needs in the sentencing county, but the probation sentencing specialist has information on programming from throughout the region and can recommend a program offered in a neighboring county. Since transportation costs for the offender to participate will be far lower than the cost of incarceration, such regionalization allows the offender to remain safely in the community. Ultimately, the judge has sole discretion to determine the appropriate sentence for the offender, but MDOC wants to ensure that it makes safe, consistent recommendations for all offenders, including those who may be in a county with limited community corrections programming.

### Returning successfully: vital documents

Having improved efforts inside the facilities, success cannot truly occur if offenders aren't provided with support and opportunities when they return home. To assist with this transition, MDOC acted over the last year to address longstanding issues like the lack of vital documents such as birth certificates, Social Security cards, or state IDs for offenders at parole. MDOC no longer waits until offenders return home to ensure they have the documents they need; the department now purchases a birth certificate for every prisoner who requests one while incarcerated (at a total cost of only \$200,000 a year). In

addition, MDOC worked with the Social Security Administration to provide prisoners with a single Social Security number with a new card before parole.<sup>10</sup> These efforts allow MDOC to bring the Secretary of State's MobileSOS operation to individual facilities so prisoners approaching parole can obtain state ID cards before release.

### Seeing success: going home and staying home

In a department as dynamic as the current MDOC and a system as complex as the criminal justice system, it is difficult to point to any single program or reform and state definitively how many offenders it has affected, but Offender Success is a key part of recent positive changes we have seen in Michigan. Most notable is the fact that the prison population dropped below 41,000 in early 2017—a level Michigan has not seen since the late 1990s. Since Offender Success was announced in 2015, the prison population has declined by more than 2,300 prisoners (5.5 percent), allowing MDOC to safely close a 1,300-bed Level I facility and return state prisoners from beds being leased in county jails.<sup>11</sup> Current MDOC projections show the prison population continuing to decline, dropping below 40,000 offenders in 2018 and reaching a plateau of roughly 39,750 prisoners. Perhaps most importantly, for the first time in many years MDOC is not projecting a significant increase in the prison population at any time over the next five years.<sup>12</sup> MDOC remains focused on providing prisoners with additional programming and opportunities for success to reduce the recidivism rate from the current 29.8 percent, which is already the second-best rate in the state's history.<sup>13</sup> The department's work will not be limited to affecting those sentenced to prison, however; the best return on investment continues to be diverting offenders from prison when it is safe to do so. Through new approaches and programs addressing offender needs, MDOC will remain focused on creating long-term offender success that will reduce crime, the effects of incarceration, and the cost of the criminal justice system for our state and its citizens. ■



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### ENDNOTES

1. MDOC, *Director's Office Memorandum 2017-24: Vocational Village at the Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility* <[https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/DOM\\_2017-24\\_MTU\\_Voc\\_Vil\\_546756\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/DOM_2017-24_MTU_Voc_Vil_546756_7.pdf)>. All websites cited in this article were accessed August 9, 2017.
2. Hendrix, *Michigan Prisons Host "Vocational Village" Open House* (April 25, 2016) <<http://woodtv.com/2016/04/25/michigan-prisons-host-vocational-village-open-house/>>.
3. MDOC, *Policy Directive 05.02.112: Education Programs for Prisoners* <[https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/05\\_02\\_112\\_515776\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/05_02_112_515776_7.pdf)>.
4. VanHulle, *Michigan Colleges Leaders in Offering Pell Grants to Prisoners*, *Crain's Detroit Business* (August 6, 2016) <<http://www.crainsdetroit.com/article/20160806/NEWS/160809877/michigan-colleges-leaders-in-offering-pell-grants-to-prisoners>>.
5. Park, *Leader Dogs for the Blind Puppies Raised and Trained in Michigan Prisons* (May 19, 2016) <[http://www.mlive.com/news/jackson/index.ssf/2016/05/leader\\_dogs\\_for\\_the\\_blind\\_pupp.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/jackson/index.ssf/2016/05/leader_dogs_for_the_blind_pupp.html)>.
6. Kramer, *That's a WRAP, 28 Corrections Connection 3* (August 2016) <[https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/CC\\_AugustNewsletter2016\\_532070\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/CC_AugustNewsletter2016_532070_7.pdf)>.
7. Criminogenic needs are factors, issues, or challenges that may increase an individual's likelihood to re-offend in the future. While the list of needs may vary slightly, most recognize antisocial thinking, antisocial associations, education/employment, leisure time, substance use, and family relations as areas of potential criminogenic need. The level of need in each category varies for each offender, and some needs may not be present. Programming and support for offenders should be tailored to their unique needs to help minimize the likelihood of re-offense.
8. The Michigan legislature adopted the Community Corrections Act, 1988 PA 511, to support the creation of local programs and sanctions that can safely divert felony offenders from the state prison system to community supervision (probation). Funding for the program is approved as part of MDOC's budget each year, and local community corrections advisory boards submit proposals to the state board focusing on evidence-based approaches affecting key metrics, including the straddle-cell prison commitment rate for the county or region and probation failure rate. The state Community Corrections Board approves funding for the individual plans annually to support these programs.
9. MDOC, *Office of Community Corrections Biannual Report* (March 2017) <[http://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/OCC\\_Biannual\\_Report\\_March\\_2017\\_553637\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/OCC_Biannual_Report_March_2017_553637_7.pdf)>.
10. MDOC, *Director's Office Memorandum 2017-21: Offender Identification Documents* <[https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/DOM\\_2017-21\\_Offender\\_ID\\_547052\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/DOM_2017-21_Offender_ID_547052_7.pdf)>.
11. Smith, *Decline in Prison Population Prompts Closure of Northern Michigan Facility* (May 31, 2016) <<http://michiganradio.org/post/decline-prison-population-prompts-closure-northern-mich-facility>>.
12. MDOC, *Prison Population Projection Report* (March 2017) <[http://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/Section\\_401\\_554437\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/Section_401_554437_7.pdf)>.
13. Champion, *Michigan's Re-incarceration Rate Among Lowest in Nation* (March 30, 2017) <[http://www.mlive.com/news/index.ssf/2017/03/michigans\\_rate\\_for\\_repeat\\_offe.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/index.ssf/2017/03/michigans_rate_for_repeat_offe.html)>.